DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 074 CS 500 587

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TITLE Performing the Narrators in Jean Stafford's "The Hope Chest."
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Doctoral Honors Seminar in Interpretation "The Phenomenon of Performance" (1st, Northwestern University, School of Speech, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization (Literature); Expressive Language; Fiction; *Interpretive Reading; Language Styles; *Literary Analysis; *Literary Perspective; Literary Styles; Narration; Prose; *Short Stories
IDENTIFIERS *Stafford (Jean)

ABSTRACT

"The Hope Chest," a short story by Jean Stafford, offers a challenge to the oral interpreter of literature because it demands that the performer demonstrate its complex narrative levels. There are five distinct facets in the personality of the central character, Miss Bellamy: a lonely, fearful old lady; a shrewd, hospitable mistress of her household; a dour, tyrannical woman; a bitter old-maid of thirty-five; and a happy young girl. The reader-narrator must reveal differing attitudes about Miss Bellamy--sympathetic at some points, cold and critical at others. Finally, the "implied" point of view of the author, Miss Stafford, causes the reader-interpreter to feel sympathy for a character whose attitudes and behavior would normally be socially unacceptable. A successful performance of this story depends on the interpreter's abilities to portray the five aspects of Miss Bellamy's character, to express the differing relationships of the narrator to her, and to suggest the values and attitudes of the author. (RN)

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# THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE

Papers presented at the first

DOCTORAL HONORS SEMINAR

IN

INTERPRETATION

The School of Speech
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

May 9-11, 1973

CS 500 587

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# Performing the Narrators in Jean Stafford's "The Hope Chest"

by

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"The Hope Chest," a short story by Jean Stafford, challenges the oral interpreter because of the demands it makes on the performer to demonstrate the complex mode in wnich the narration unfolds. The action of the story takes place mainly in the mind of the principal character, Miss Rhoda Bellamy, although a separate narrating voice exists in the story as well.

In constructing the character of Miss Bellamy, Stafford gives the reader glimpses of five different Miss Bellamys, or at least five distinct facets of her character. Using terms from Wayne C. Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction, this paper proposes to explore, first, the character of each of the "five Miss Bellamys"; second, the degree of distance between the narrator and Miss Bellamy; and third, the position of the implied author in relation to both the narrator and Miss Bellamy.

In addition to the obvious narrating voice who gives the exposition and directs the telling of events, Miss Bellamy herself acts as a "disguised" narrator--that is, according to Booth, "one who tells the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out [her] role." Miss Bellamy, then, in all five of her facets, is a highly dramatized narrator acting as reflector, in whose "mirror" the audience

views the events. The fragmenting of the character of Miss Bellamy, however, fragments her view, forcing the reader to gather the pieces of narration as from a multi-faceted prism.

The Miss Bellamy of the present time is a shivering old lady waiting in bed for her breakfast.

> Miss Bellamy was old and cold and she lay quaking under an eiderdown which her mother had given her when she was a girl of seventeen. It had been for her hope chest. (113)

She whimpers for the attention of Belle, the maid, worries about the sound of tree limbs scraping against the house, and thinks the roof will fall in on her. She is aware of her terrible loneliness: "Belle! Come before I die of loneliness" (117). She thinks of herself as cantankerous but is too feeble for aggressiveness.

The Miss Bellamy of the near past plays at being mistress of her household. She busies herself at the trifling task of twisting scraps of last year's Christmas wrappings into spills to use to light the fires. When Ernest Leonard comes knocking timidly at her door, she is the stern lady of the house, bargaining over the purchase of his homely spruce wreath, dispensing her meager quarter from the purse on her belt as if purchases of this sort were an important part of her daily activities. She thinks herself shrewd, hospitable in a reserved way, and completely in control of the social situation.

A third facet of Miss Bellamy is her self-image as a dour, tyrannical woman. In this mood, she is a grisly witch and harsh despot, much to be reckoned with. The dire threats she composes in her mind are never more than thoughts: "I will eat you, little boy, because once upon a time I, too, had pink cheeks and fair skin and clear eyes. And don't

you deny it" (116). She finds comfort in making unspoken threats to her servants, threats that the reader understands are empty of power. "If there is a destructive squirrel in my house, I will give Belle her walking papers. . . . I shall speak severely to Homer. If he calls himself my yard-man, he can attend to these details" (114).

Two Miss Bellamys of the far distant past are revealed to the reader: the Rhodas of fifty or more years ago. The reader knows these two through dialogue with the father. In one scene we hear a bitter old-maid of thirty-five with "no beau but her dear papa."

> Well, Papa, the laugh's on you. Here I am, thirty-five years old, and in the eighteen years since I came out, I have had no beau but my dear papa. No, I will not go to the concert at Bowdoin College. No, I do not want to join you in a glass of claret. I shall return to my bedroom and read Mrs. Gaskell, thanking you every time I turn a page for giving me so expensive a copy of Cranford. (114)

In another view, we hear a somewhat happier version of Rhoda exclaim over a pile of Christmas presents from him, not minding at all that her papa loves her to a fault:

> Merry Christmas, Papa dear. Oh, how cunning of you to hang up mistletoe! What girl in the world would want more than a beau like you? Can I have my presents now? It's one past midnight, Papa! Oh, Papa, darling, you have given me a brass fender for my fireplace! Papa, a medallioned sewing drum! An emerald ring! A purple velvet peignoir! I wish you a very merry Christmas, Papa. (118)

This glimpse of a young Rhoda at a happy Christmas in the past contrasts with the lonely old Miss Bellamy of the present. Both of the monologues about her papa intrude upon the scenes without introduction or commentary, creating an antiphonal quality in the narration, volleying from present to past. The reader is hardly sure that these are conscious thoughts of Miss Bellamy except for the hints that "she had hung [the

Christmas wreath] last night at the stroke of midnight" (118), linking her present action with the memory of her father.

Although the narrator is not a separate dramatized character, the reader (both performer and silent reader), assumes certain characteristics about the narrator. First, the narrator seems to be a woman, younger perhaps than Miss Bellamy, but of the same womanish tastes and socio-economic status. For the most part, the lady narrator agrees with Miss Bellamy's values, especially in matters of decorum. The narrator agrees that the Christmas wreath is "scraggly" and notices that it is "probably staining the hand-blocked French paper with a design of pastoral sweethearts" (114). Her voice reflects Miss Bellamy's snobbery toward the young wreath salesman, Ernest Leonard, whose manners do not pass inspection: "he opened the storm door without asking leave. . . . He was not decently shy and he spoke up immediately. . . . He bore a faint, unpleasant smell of mud" (117). The narrating voice echoes Miss Bellamy's values in recording the boy's great effrontery: "The rag-tag-and-bob-tail boy looked at her father's treasures as if he had seen such things every day of his life" (116). In most instances, there is so little distance between the narrator and Miss Bellamy that the narrating voice is virtually Miss Bellamy's own.

In small ways, however, the narrator contradicts and condemns Miss Bellamy. The information that the narrator hastens to share with the reader before Miss Bellamy is fully awake in the first scene is not the sort of information that Miss Bellamy herself would be eager for the reader to know. "There had not, in the history of Boston society, been a greater fiasco than Rhoda Bellamy's debut" (113) is more blunt and overstated than Miss Bellamy might like. In a privileged view of Miss

Bellamy the narrator claims intimacy with the drowsy woman, remarking, "She had been like that as a child, she had loved sleep better than eating or playing" (114); but the narrator sounds fondly superior to her when she says, "She slopped her milk, and it made a row of buttons down the front of her challis guimpe" (115). Like a busy-body, the narrator shares an aside with the reader about the cattails in a pitcher. She tells how Miss Bellamy had impressed a workman into shellacking them by telling him that her father had picked those cattails by the Jordan. Then the narrator corrects our view by exposing Miss Bellamy's invention, as if behind her back: "This happened not to be true, as her father had been dead for twenty years and she gathered them herself in her own meadow beside the local river" (116). Finally, the narrator seems to turn on Miss Bellamy in the end of the story, observing:

> The old lady cackled hideously and screamed, "You goose! You namby-pamby! I hung it there myself!" . . . When she [Belle] had gone, the spinster closed her eyes against Ernest Leonard's painted pine cones, but she nursed her hurt like a baby at a milkless breast, with tearless eyes. (119)

The metaphor, while it may be appropriate to the empty, fruitless life we have just witnessed, seems a cold, tactless way of disposing of a woman with whose hurts we have come to commiserate.

The pseudo-sympathetic tone of the narrator makes us dislike her for exposing Miss Bellamy to our scrutiny, despite the fact that we crave the information she supplies. On the other hand, the implied author, the Stafford that stands behind the norms of the story, has caused us to feel sympathy with a character whose attitudes and behavior we reject. We deplore Miss Bellamy's selfishness, her cranky disposition, her miserly hoarding of the gifts, the hope chest, the heirlooms;

we do not admire her fastidious taste, nor do we think her treasures beautiful because they do not yield a beautiful life for Miss Bellamy. Although Rhoda's relationship with her father may outline the cause of her unfulfilled life, the implied author allows the narrator to expose Miss Bellamy's own culpability as we watch her continue to exploit the goodness of others. Yet, while we side temporarily with Belle and Ernest Leonard against Miss Bellamy, we know that neither of them is permanently hurt or inconvenienced by her; Ernest Leonard, after all, does sell his wreath and get his quarter, and Belle is able to leave the room quickly, "unruffled" and smiling. Only Miss Bellamy is left in misery, the more to be pitied because the pain is of her own making.

As if from behind the narrator's back, the implied author uses the scene between Miss Bellamy and Ernest Leonard as a parody of courtship. While the narrator reveals the scene in Miss Bellamy's memory as if it were the simple explanation for the presence of the wreath in Miss Bellamy's bedroom, the reader understands that the implied author has chosen to structure this scene as a model of other times from the past when young men courted Rhoda Bellamy. "Ernest Leonard MaCammon" sounds like an aristocratic suitor, son of Robert Jon McCammon, the chimney cleaner who owns a mule. With cap in hand, Ernest comes bearing "gifts," his wreath, which cannot compare favorably with the rare objects Miss Bellamy already possesses. Although she is offered the "treasure," she must bribe her caller for his affection, demanding a kiss for her quarter. After a reluctant peck on the cheek, the "beau" flees, leaving the door ajar, letting in the cold. Miss Bellamy's sour disposition, her defensiveness against supposed trickery, her snobbish scrutiny of the gentlemen caller condemn her in the reader's eyes.

Still, the reader's inside view of Miss Bellamy convinces him that she suffers enough for her faults and that she is to be pitied. Although we wish for a change in her character and a corresponding change in her fortune, we are satisfied that such a change is impossible at her age when habit is so ingrained. The reader's reaction to Miss Bellamy alternates between condemnation and sympathy: condemnation from the witness of the narrator and from Miss Bellamy herself, and sympathy from the norms and attitudes of the implied author. The reader leaves the story, much the way Belle leaves the room in the end, smiling at Miss Bellamy and wishing her well, but feeling little hope for her happiness.

The successful performance of this story rests on a clear conception of the five Miss Bellamys, since each one must be dramatized. The narrating voice, as well, must be portrayed in its differing relationships to the character. Finally, the interpreter's sense of the implied author must pervade his performance of the narrators so that the norms of the implied author will emerge in the performance as the narrative unfolds.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961).

[2]Jean Stafford, The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).